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Motherhood, Infanticide and Slavery in Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987)

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What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children.–Toni Morrison, Beloved (1987)

Motherhood has been central to numerous works of literature throughout history. Until now, motherhood remains as complex as ever. Despite numerous discourses on performativity with regards to becoming a woman (Butler, 1993), the accepted concept of motherhood still seems to lean towards a model that claims that "a woman is somehow reborn as a mother with the birth of a child" (Kroats & Fraustino, 2015) and that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because she is now permanently attached to her child (Akujobi, 2011).

In the next few pages, we will see that motherhood transcends, if not resists, this widely accepted stance on motherhood. The experience of Black motherhood molded and remolded by the time and space of which it occurs has always been laden with complex challenges: from being torn away from their children before and after the slave trade, or like animals forced to have children for the sake of bringing more slaves into the world, to extreme poverty and systematic abuse by racist and patriarchal institutions (Thaxton-Simmons, 2012). Even years after the abolition of slavery in 1865, the repercussions of slavery remain ever-present in the lives of African Americans. These repercussions are seen especially in the exclusion of Black women in economic, social, and political discourses that directly affect their lives. So, they remain vulnerable to the same system that had raped, killed, and tortured their mothers and the mothers before them.

With motherhood being a central theme in a significant number of African American feminist literature, this paper aims to explore motherhood in two of Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison's novels, Beloved (1987), the first of her historical trilogy encompassing 150 years of

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African American history. Although very different from her other novels, notable recurring themes arise throughout her body of work, such as her interweaving of history, myths, and literary allusions and the continuous distortion of reality in the perspective of complex and nuanced Black women.

This paper aims to explore Motherhood and Infanticide in the context of slavery and its implications on society's preconceived notions of the former. As a novel about relationships, specifically mother and daughter relationships, Beloved explores the dynamics of race, class, gender, and its implications on family ties, of which I will discuss based on the concept of motherhood in Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976).

Rich claims that motherhood is both an experience and an institution, delineated by who exercises power in which situations. The former is owned by mothers themselves: the aspects of motherhood that are painful and horrible and those that are of warmth and love. The latter is much less individualized, Rich claims that the social institution of motherhood has limited women's growth by compartmentalizing them as mere nurturers. It pertains to the patriarchal systems that govern womanhood and directly affect policies and society. Rich posits that motherhood, with its potential and power, becomes subsumed by patriarchal control when turned into a social and historical institution.

Overall, this paper aims to answer the question: How, as an institution and an experience, is motherhood re/presented in *Beloved*.

When your children literally do not belong to you, what does it mean to be a mother? When "definitions belong to the definers, not the defined," how should a mother love her children when she herself is literally enslaved not only by her masters but by a far more abhorrent system that views her not as a woman but as property? Sethe's act of infanticide symbolizes an attempt to subvert and resist the institution of slavery. While infanticide in itself is not exclusive to slave culture, its relationship to it is certainly notable. Numerous scholars in feminist studies, such as Hine & Wittenstein (1981), claim that African American women before the abolishment of slavery practiced infanticide as a strategy of resistance, exemplifying their refusal to participate in and help perpetuate a system that treated their bodies and their children's bodies as property.

As a unique experience of motherhood, it is Sethe's mother-love, the desperate attempt to refuse her daughter the life of bondage and pain that made death a better option over life, that nuances *Beloved* because of how it destabilizes the myth of the protective mother-figure and the accepted concept of motherhood as nurturing and self-sacrificial. We see that even Sethe's tightly-knight Black community found her act horrendous because they have different preconceived notions of motherhood. Even Paul D, a former slave himself who had gone

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through torture and had boxed within his "tin can" heart, tells Sethe upon his discovery of her infanticide, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four". Likened to an animal, even by those who have been tortured by slavery – Sethe tries to justify what she had done and states the unforgiving paradox explored by the novel, "She had to be safe, and I put her where she would be … How if I hadn't killed her, she would have died".

This incomprehensible mother-love, puzzled her community and even her own daughter, Denver, caused Sethe the company of the men and women of the community, and therefore the protection of the collective. Ironically, this act of mother-love also drives away her older male children. Even in freedom, Sethe's remains unstable, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." Still imprisoned by the guilt she feels from her daughter's death, and up until Beloved's "exorcism" by the townsfolk, Sethe spends her days justifying what she did to Beloved.

Beloved calls for a rethinking of what it means to be a mother – to walk on two feet and not four, to understand human nature when faced with desperation and bondage, of oppression and desire for freedom. It does not ask us to forgive Sethe for the crime of murder, or condone her act of infanticide, but it calls for us to understand and see the revolving shapes of horror even when most of the sixty million African American slaves' name have been forgotten in time – their stories, forever lost; while leaving us hopeful that better days are to come.

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